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PHOTO: AFP

Sartorial freedom

This is in reference to Kaniz Fatema's letter "Sartorial freedom," (Dec 22). She is absolutely right when she wrote about her freedom and liberty to chose her clothing to wear in her work-place, and nobody should not object to that. If I read her correctly, I think she is writing this letter about the French government's recent decision of banning headscarves in their schools.

Every country has the right to fix dress codes for their schools. As do we in our country. You will also agree with me that if any school has white shirts and blue pants as their dress code you cannot say, "No, it's my freedom of choice to wear black shirts and white pants." What do you think schools are supposed to do?

My humble question to my sister Kaniz Fatema is that either you are Bangladeshi-born, or your parents were Bangladeshi-born, and are now living in the UK. The UK government did not force you or your parents to leave this country. That you did to have a better life in this material world. You people chose to live in a "Dar-ul Harb" country and can't blame them for their dress code. As far as I know, the UK government will have no objection if you want to wear religious dresses in your private life. You have already taken hijab and I think nobody ever asked you to take it off. It can be taken off only in school or any institution which has a unified dress code and that is nothing to do with religion.

If you do not like their decision, please come back to your own country and wear hijab or burkha -- whatever you like. We have plenty of these nowadays and nobody objects. By the way, hijab is not a true religious dress. You have to have cover your whole face as per the Holy Quran (Sura Al Ahjab: Verse 59).

Enayet Ullah Forhad
Sukrabad, Dhaka

Hijab

Usually I don't read English newspapers. But today (Dec 23) I bought a copy of The Daily Star and read a little bit from it. One feature drew my attention. It was a letter, "Sartorial freedom" written by Kaniz Fatima from the UK. I read the letter very thoroughly and with attention. It was written with a bold heart. I thank her for the letter.

If people like her come out and write the truth about hijab and other discrimination against Islam, most of the non-Muslim people may get the right views and opinions regarding these issues. Most of the Muslim girls in the UK or other non-Muslim countries don't care about hijab. They forget their religious mandate. I'm so proud to see such a well educated young lady in the UK who believes the religious truth and follows the rules. Mighty Allah bless her.

Azad
One-mail

Dear Monsieur Chirac,

I am deeply concerned about your government's plan to ban all "conspicuous" religious signs in public places, a plan that seems to have a focused target -- headscarves in public schools in France. We are further shocked and dismayed by your statements on December 17 in which you have spoken in favour of such a ban.

Clearly such a ban would compel many Muslim girls to have to make the extremely difficult choice between their education and their religion. Since hijab is not merely a symbol, it's an act of worship in Islam, and Muslim women who practice it, do so solely for complying with the commandments of God, having been denied this right, many of them would decide to leave school rather than act against their faith. Such a bill would thus lead to a violation of Muslim women's right to education and the right to work, both guaranteed under many international human rights treaties, to which France is a signatory.

This kind of ban is contradictory to the very essence of pluralism, and even secularism, which France has steadfastly upheld for so long. Such a discriminatory move, patronised by the French government, will alienate not only Muslims in France and elsewhere, but also all those who believe in equal and full rights for women and minorities. France, a respected and leading member of the world community, seems to be in a grip of hysterical Islamophobia.

I urge you as a respected world leader to take a bold and visionary stand against the growing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred in French society and prevent any legislation being enacted against minorities, especially the Muslim women. Human rights are not subject to the whims of public opinion. Even if a majority of the French public want ban on hijab, this cannot be accepted as this is against fundamental rights. This is not secularism either, by any definition.

Shah Abdul Hannan
Former Secretary, Government of Bangladesh
Chairman, The Centre for Human Rights

Education in a democracy

There are many divisions in the existing education system in Bangladesh. I would like to talk about the particular education system controlled by the government, specifically the madrasa board, and the secondary and higher secondary education board of Bangladesh.

According to the constitution, Bangladesh is a democratic country. But the practice of law is showing some incongruity as far as education is concerned. Education of any sort (regardless whether it is religious or practical) should be controlled under one umbrella, and, as we are a democracy, proper research should be done regarding resource allocation. This process has not yet been started appropriately in Bangladesh and mismanagement is pervasive in this sector. I would hope that the government would take prompt initiative in this regard and thus erase the trace of double standard. Should I keep my fingers crossed?

Tawhid Shams Chowdhury
English Department, BRAC University

What is wrong with Bangladesh?

As an expatriate, I read the online newspapers of Bangladesh such as The Daily Star to keep in touch with what's going on in the old country. It is saddening to see that the front pages almost always have some news reports of crimes that seem so rampant in Bangladesh these days.

I have no doubt that these crime reports warrant making it to the front page of the national dailies. To see a heart-rending report such as the murder of a father and his young son in their own home in front of other family members recently in Pallabi makes me wonder how long do the people of Bangladesh have to put up with a system that has failed them miserably for years on end. How can the present government deny that it has failed totally to provide any security whatsoever to the people of Bangladesh.

The present government had more than two years to get its act together and do something about the crime situation. Since it has not been able to do that, it only shows that there is something definitely wrong with the government apparatus and as such it is not fit to govern the country anymore. It would be unrealistic to think the government would step down and acknowledge its impotency. So it is up to each and every thinking citizen of Bangladesh to demand strongly that the current government either take necessary steps to improve the current situation or otherwise hand over power to an interim government. I hope that something is done to achieve this goal in the near future.

Victory of BJP or communalism?

Asghar Ali Engineer's "Victory of BJP or communalism?" (Dec 22) is an article for the sake of an article. It has no head, no tail, and hangs on some improvised concept of pseudo-secularism.

Mr Engineer's credentials as a crusader or secular guru (founder of Centre for Study of Society and Secularism.) is not quite reflected in the article; instead he has honestly tried to spew his displeasure as much as he can towards the BJP, wearing his secular mask.

But he did not have much choice, as the BJP won in three states out of four with a comfortable margin and without playing the Hindutva card. From a mere 2 Lok Sabha seats in 1984 to 196 seat in 1999, it would be great injustice to the Indian constitution and people if we say that the BJP has won all these seats riding the Hindutva chariot. I know so many people who cannot be termed as Muslim-bashers or communal but voted for the BJP. The BJP-led Vajpayee government has 16 major political parties including Mamata's Trinamul, Naidu's Telegu Desham, Sharad Yadav's Janata Dal, and George Fernandes's Samata. Mamata, Naidu, Yadav and Fernandes by no means can be tagged as communal. So, the time has come for the our great secularist thinkers, (I refer to the likes of Praful Bidwai, AG Noorani, MJ Akbar, Niloofar Sarwardi etc) to rediscover the root cause of the BJP's success. It is definitely not Hindutva or Hinduism. It is something else. It is a mobilisation against extreme Islamic Fundamentalism worldwide, which is an unforeseen danger from 1.3 billion people and 57 countries.

MK Barua, New Delhi



PHOTO: AFP

Hasibul Haque
Arlington, Virginia

Drama within drama?

Two poor women, Noor Jahan and Hasina Banu, unveiled the fact that they did not faint due to starvation during Hasina's public visit to *monga* affected Nilphamari. They have spoken out in a state minister's public meeting. They said that they fainted due to their illness and as they were fasting.

It is not in the least true that they had been starving for seven days before they finally fainted at Sheikh Hasina's public meeting. By digging out the facts, the government body was able to unmask a put-on show drama which had been enacted to embarrass the ruling party.

Well, it is quite common in politics to give a simple incident political colour in order to play politics. It is very encouraging that the poor women spoke out. Then again, the confession might be a forced one written and directed by the people of ruling party. Is there any third eye that can bring the truth to light?

Rifat Mahbub
Dhaka University

When will our politicians grow up?

This was my feeling when I read about the summing up (of our politicians) by the World Bank Resident Director, Dr Christine Wallich. Yet I congratulate her for the bold and frank statement she made at the AMCham meeting on December 17. Though the news was not new, I felt humbly ashamed and felt pity (being prompted by a foreign dignitary) for our so-called leaders and politicians who do not mind undermining the image of the country for their own self-interest.

Wallich declared, "Many of them are unfairly and unprofessionally presenting the bad aspects of the country over the years to the outside world." They are adept at doing greater harm to their own country for little gain from foreign hands! She continued to say, "Political discourse brings up all the bad things all the time," a pathetic absence of self-respect is such, according to her, that "Overseas Bangladeshis in Washington (under heinous guidelines from their masters?) sometimes go to their US congressmen and say that the government is doing all the bad things in the country." She also opined that the congressmen, most of whom didn't even know where Bangladesh is, got a very negative impression of Bangladesh. Appreciating "the significant improvement of the country's social indices," she said that Bangladesh should have had a better image in the world.

Political differences and liking or disliking of an individual or a

particular political party should not become a criterion for focusing the image of the country (as bad) and prestige and status of the country must be kept high and not be compromised for individual aggrandisement or collective vendetta. Isn't it the time that we realise that, as they say, a criminal will pay for his crimes even if it takes a while?

AF Rahman
Dhaka

Fareed Zakaria's column

As if we did not have enough of the US-controlled media bombarding us round the clock from multiple press and TV channels, does The Daily Star now also have to become a mouthpiece for biased American views? I am referring to Fareed Zakaria, whose Newsweek columns are being recycled, presumably against heavy payment in foreign exchange, in the Point-Counterpoint page.

To cite just one example of Zakaria's role as handmaiden to the US government we may look at his interpretation of the Libyan decision to improve relations with the West, set out in a sly aside (Dec 24). Anyone capable of independent analysis would see that the Libyan announcement of the abandonment of programs of WMD (which no one had ever claimed existed before) forms part of a series of carefully orchestrated moves over a period of many years which have as their main objective allowing the return of US oil companies to that country. Ignoring all this history however, Zakaria finds only that the Libyan action is an indirect benefit of the war on Iraq! Which happens to be the exact spin that Bush and Blair have been trying to project, desperate as they are to present some justification, however far-fetched, of their invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The truth is that people like Fareed Zakaria are not journalists of integrity but propagandists who have internalised the self-serving value systems of the American establishment. Hence for example the frequent nauseating references in Zakaria's columns to the "eloquence" and "courage" of George Bush. At the same time there is never a mention of Bush's war crimes or the cowardice of his blatant pro-Israeli policies.

The Daily Star would do well to rid itself of this unnecessary occupation of its limited printspace by yet another manifestation of US media hegemony.

Rafiqullah Bhuyian
Maghbazar, Dhaka

Experts say Pakistan may have aided Iran

Tactically, Pakistan is trying to make its scientists scapegoats. By doing so it thinks it can escape the nuclear fiasco and blame it on the greed of "rogue" individuals. What's disturbing is who runs Pakistan and who is in control of its nuclear facilities. The most important question is: should we trust Pakistan again?

Who runs the country and to whom are we talking is a major issue. Is it Pervez Musharraf or the ISI? Or is it the Mullahs? All past efforts would go fruitless if Washington does not get its priorities straight and start to refocus in the fight on terrorism.

Paresh Puhan
New York, USA

DS report on PM's visit to DU

DS has grossly violated their neutrality in reporting once again and has shown clear and biased inclination to a particular political party in their report (Dec 23) on the PM's visit to Dhaka University to confer awards to meritorious students. Although the DS reporter found a tiny group of protesting students masking their faces with black cloths in protest against the PM's visit to photograph, he has nakedly exposed his bias towards a particular political party by suppressing any photograph of thousands of jubilant students welcoming the PM's visit. Not only that, but DS printed a separate news item titled "DU students protest PM's visit" but not one titled "DU students welcome PM's visit."

Many times before we have seen such naked bias of DS. DS is not happy when they find something going in favour of present BNP-led four-party alliance government. We find the DS crying on this and that issue to tarnish the image of Bangladesh under the present government or to belittle the good efforts of the present government.

Dewan G. Ahmed, Shamoly, Dhaka

Alarming news

A news item published in The Daily Star (Dec 22) drew my attention. The news was about a private zoo of Mr Sitesh Babu of Srimgongal, Moulavibazar, and the report was a very alarming one. Mr Sitesh Babu has a private zoo without any permission from the proper authority. Nobody has the right to cage wild animals. Mr Sitesh has caught a lot of critically endangered animals from the nearer forest and kept them illegally in cages in his private zoo. I heard that Mr Sitesh Babu was a conservationist but this enthusiastic news unmasked him. There was a poacher behind the mask of an animal conservationist. A few days ago his pet dogs killed a tiger that came from the forest into the village for food which news was

A moderate country

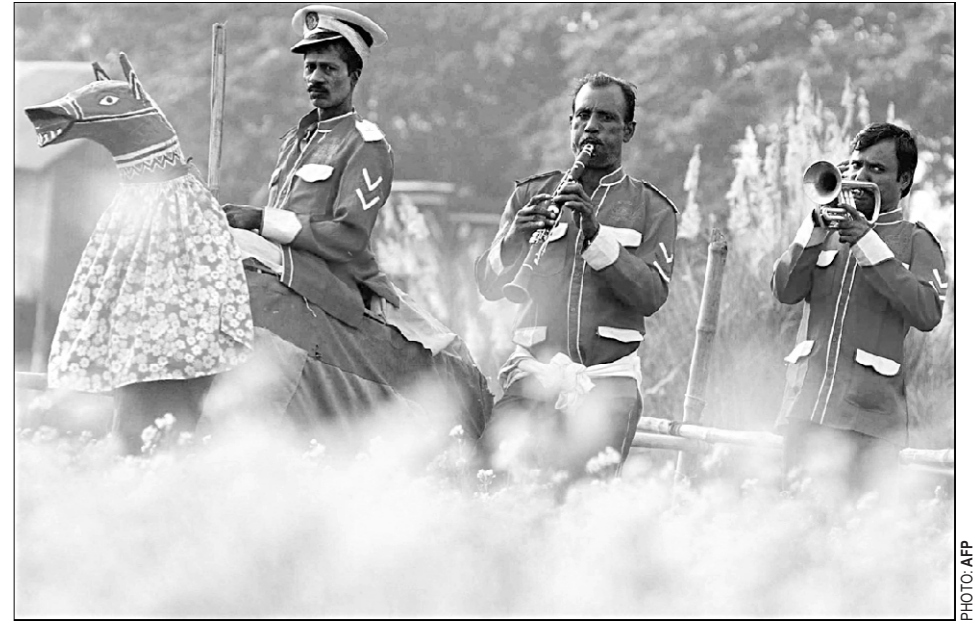


PHOTO: AFP

While living outside of Bangladesh, I miss my country very much and am very proud of it. The US state department has lauded Bangladesh for its freedom of religious practice, which Bangladesh deserves because throughout its history, it has always been accepting and tolerant to multiculturalism and multiple religions.

Still there are some cases of law and order problem and problem with our politicians for which our country has been suffering for quite some time. But these are not problems with the ingrained nature of our very peaceful and tolerant nation. It is because of the very moderate nature of our dear people that Bangladesh, I believe, will never grow to be a religiously fanatic and fundamentally extremist country. Neither will it grow to be a liberal extremist country (like France) where the right to wear hijab will be taken away in the name of secularism. In a sense I don't see any difference between the Taliban who pull down and destroy Buddha statues of immense historical importance in the name of religion and the government of France who support banning hijab by Muslim women in school in the name of secularism.

Canada is now the most tolerant multicultural society in the world. But if our politicians in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India can understand and act accordingly, I believe the countries in the subcontinent will be, historically speaking the most tolerant, moderate and multi-cultural societies in the world. The people of this part of the world have always proved that. Should our politicians not heed to the language of this part of the world?

Masud Rana, One-mail

published in maximum newspapers.

I hope the authority responsible will consider the matter and send all these endangered animals to Dhaka National Zoo for better care and management.

Dr. Chy Jalal Uddin Murshed (Rumi)
Saila House, Dishari R/A, Kalibari road, Sunamganj

Politics with people's misery

Your article, "Politics with people's misery" (Dec 20) attracted my attention. It seems that the leader of the opposition has lied in public with the malefide intention of breeding hatred of the government. The fact that she has done this with emotive issues as famine and human misery makes this

serious manner. The former PM has used this issue in a way that suggests she would welcome even a famine to discredit the government. What more can one say of Sheikh Hasina and her party? It is not the first time that she has attempted to discredit the BNP Government on false premises; she has made this a bad habit. She seems to care little for the truth or what it does to our image as a nation. It was only over a couple of years ago when, as the Prime Minister, she was boasting about the success of her agricultural policy that made Bangladesh self-sufficient in food. Now how come that she saw a famine in Bangladesh so soon after declaring Bangladesh self-sufficient in food production? Was her claim of self-sufficiency unsustainable and a propaganda stunt? Did she forget this deliberately so she could raise

rary shortage of food (which in the northern districts is a very temporary phase called *monga*) to create hatred against the BNP government. In other words, Sheikh Hasina was playing politics with human misery and that too on fabricated premises.

Shahjahan Ahmed
Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka

The "alternative stream"

Dr B Chowdhury is at least trying to start a campaign which, if carried out properly, would be a big improvement in our political culture. It is not important who has political experience or who hasn't, the point is of track record. We know very well our present political leaders. Most of them are illiterate criminals and thugs.



PHOTO: AFP

Wayward Zionists

Israel, an outpost of the US in the Middle East is the fruit of the Balfour declaration of 1917. From the very beginning it was unyielding to international laws. It has grabbed the vast area of Palestine. Now it is a spoilt protege of the US. The PM of Israel, Ariel Sharon, is recalcitrant to the UN. He ignores the Green Line and thumbs his nose at the UN resolutions.

Recently, some Israeli soldiers have disagreed with Sharon's rule of oppression. They do not want to satisfy Sharon's immoral orders. They warned that they

would quit the army en masse if need be. Israel wants to strike Iran after the collapse of Saddam's regime. Saddam was unseated on allegation of WMD. But Israel has WMD also. The US is not jittery about Zionism. Israel has terrorised the Middle East since its inception in 1948. I hope the hawkish leaders of Israel like Sharon, Mofaz and Sylvan will normalise the political landscape of the Middle East.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept of English, Dhaka University

accusation, if correct, truly detestable. The woman in question has called Sheikh Hasina a "great liar." Our politicians lecture us about morals, about values and about building a corruption-free society. Yet they are those who indulge in lies, lack in morals and encourage all forms of corruption. Now an accusation (that of lying in a public meeting) has been placed at the feet of the leader of the opposition who has also once been our Prime Minister and is the daughter of Bangabandhu. The nation is waiting to see how Sheikh Hasina answers this accusation and clears her name.

It is unfortunate that apart from The Daily Star, few other newspapers have covered this story in a

the horror of a famine knowing its impact on the public from experience of the famine during her father's time, when the government dismissed it as mischief of anti-national elements, a denial that led the people to turn against it? In her desire to hasten the downfall of the BNP, she was overlooking a few other facts well-known to everybody; that today we have a good food reserve; that the distribution system is efficient and that there are now just too many NGOs working in the rural areas to let anyone die of starvation in the country.

The fact that Bangladesh did not see the famine which Sheikh Hasina had said there was proves to us that she was using a tempo-

Think about the caretaker government. It has no political experience, but how does it control the law and order situation and evict illegal installations? The reason is simple. They wish to do so. If Dr Chowdhury can bring clear record-holders into his platform and can make the campaign successful, I believe much of the rubbish in the political arena can be removed. It may take some time but it has to be done.

Md Hossain
University of British Columbia, Vancouver